

Excerpt from *Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins* by Maddalena Bearzi, published by Harvard University Press.
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beautiful minds



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Out of the blue, I see a gray body slowly rising from the bottom. Nose glued to the porthole, I strain to follow the fluid movements, looking downward, until it almost hurts. Suddenly, an inquisitive eye pauses just inches from mine. It's only for an instant. Then, as though it were never there, the dolphin continues its rise to the surface and vanishes into the gloomy water. With my heart thumping, I frantically clean the winter sludge from the glass, hoping for another encounter.

And here she is once again. It's Mara. I can see her sex as she approaches my little window in slow motion. She lingers this time, inspecting my face, so different from hers, so alien. With one eye, then the other, she rolls, seemingly weightless, in a sort of circular dance. An intense shiver runs down my

spine. Three, four, five times we meet and meet again, so close and so distant, divided by that glass. My friend, calling my name brings me back to the real world. I reluctantly pull myself away from the window and turn to go. As I walk away, I feel Mara's eyes following my every step until I disappeared behind the aquarium gate.

I still don't know what it was that struck me most: her living sad glance looking straight into my eyes, her mysterious "smile," or that harmonious, lethargic ballet. I don't really remember if it was in that moment or some other that I decided to become a field biologist, but I know that I felt at home with that dolphin and suddenly realized how caged and confined her world must be. What I do remember is forming a firm conviction that dolphins have the right to their own home.

With rare exceptions, they do not live within the territorial boundaries of one country. We can't save dolphins and whales simply by protecting an area of the seas. Unlike land-based national parks and sanctuaries, sea-based ones are not protected islands. This means negotiating international treaties every time a new conservation issue arises. The oceans are expansive entities where so many things happen out of sight — from illegal dumping to illegal fishing — that enforcement of protection policies is extremely difficult.

Some solutions exist. To prevent bycatch, for example, fishing gear can be modified to allow nontarget species a means of escape, or acoustic "pingers" may be attached to nets so that dolphins are not caught in the first place. Also, over 9 million tourists a year go whale watching, making this business as valuable as whaling from an economic standpoint. Could one become the substitute for the other? It would require significant incentives and re-education, but perhaps this is another opportunity for partial solutions worth exploring. Where there is economic gain to be had or rechanneled, therein lies the possibility for effecting changes on longstanding traditions and beliefs that may inhibit conservation. Money talks, and we need to look for situations in which creative thinking will produce opportunities.

We must continue to seek solutions, even if we falter in the short term. To protect dolphins, we must first learn how to protect and manage the ecosystems in which they live — those ecosystems that, in many cases, we have already brought to the brink of destruction. Without protecting their home, there is no hope of saving the dolphins. If we eat their food, we need to find a way to do it that doesn't irreparably deplete the available resources. We must learn how to intelligently co-exist with other species on this planet. But that's not all.

If we take the common management approach that seeks to understand and adjust for short term trends in any given corner of the food web, we probably overlook the history of the thing we are trying to manage. Consider blue whale populations, for example. We need to protect these animals



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because they are in danger of extinction in many parts of the world, so we enact legislation and controls that attempt to accomplish this. But in failing to consider the historical view of blue whale stocks, we are effectively basing our conservation efforts on a concept of "normal" that does not take the historical decline into consideration and does not give us an accurate idea of what caused the problem in the first place.

Restoring the natural status of the ocean to whatever it may have been in the past is most likely an impossible task, due to the sheer magnitude of the problems that face it. Unfortunately the ecosystem collapses occurring in many parts of the world may not be reversible and represent cases in which

we can never go back. Scientists and legislators need to turn their attention to making sure the damage is assessed properly and take the short term steps necessary to prevent more damage, and we all need to learn from our mistakes.

Strengthening and locally enforcing fishing and whaling regulations, raising public awareness through education on sustainable fisheries and ocean pollution, increasing research efforts, understanding ecological relationships and linkages in the marine environments, reducing fishery quotas, modifying fishing gear, and developing marine protected areas and time-area closures for fishing are just some of the efforts needed to bring about change.

In all conservation efforts, we need to watch our potential solutions carefully. We need to make sure that our solutions do not wind up contributing to our problems. The precautionary principle dictates that "if the potential consequences of an action may be severe or irreversible, in the absence of full scientific certainty the burden of proof falls on those who would advocate taking the action." In other words above all else, do no harm. If we are to change the current trends and begin to reverse some of the environmental devastation that our species has inflicted, we must adopt a precautionary approach that incorporates this principle.



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